

Partner aggression in high-risk families affects parenting beginning at birth

April 2 2012

Bickering spouses may need to clean up their act. New research at the University of Oregon finds that the level of aggression between partners around the time when a child is born impacts how a mom will be parenting three years later.

The study -- published in the *Journal of [Family Psychology](#)* -- is part of a [longitudinal research](#) effort involving more than 400 mothers in high-risk family environments, based mostly on risk for child-welfare involvement and [socioeconomic status](#), who were initially recruited at a San Diego, Calif., hospital when their children were born in 1996-97.

At issue is whether psychological aggression -- name-calling, arguing and slamming doors -- and [physical abuse](#) between parents leads to harsh parenting in a high-risk sample across the early years of child rearing. Until recently, researchers have focused mostly on low-risk, middle class samples when trying to understand the role of partner aggression in the family. That focus also has often been on school-aged children, despite a growing understanding of the importance of the early environment in shaping healthy development.

"We have long been aware that high levels of [family conflict](#) can have a negative effect on children's development, but most people tend to think that this doesn't apply to babies. In fact, we are now finding that this notion of toxic stress in families applies to babies as well," said Philip A. Fisher, a professor of psychology at the UO and scientist at the independent, non-profit Oregon Social Learning Center. "We are finding

that people should mind their relationships with their spouses, not just with their babies."

For the study, UO doctoral student Alice M. Graham, in collaboration with Fisher and Hyoun K. Kim, also a scientist at the Oregon Social Learning Center, revisited questionnaire data from 461 of the 488 initially recruited mothers who had provided information about their partner relationship during the four-year study period from birth through the child's third birthday.

"Even when we accounted for other important risk factors, such as maternal depression or history of abuse, we found that the level of partner aggression at the birth of a child and change over time predicts moms' harsh parenting at three years of age," Graham said. The moms' harsh parenting in turn predicted higher levels of behavior problems for the children at three years of age.

"This raises broader questions: Does partner aggression at the time of birth shape how moms see their kids? And how early in development might children be affected by aggression between partners?"

In collaboration with Jennifer Pfeifer, professor of psychology at the UO, Graham and Fisher are now using functional magnetic resonance imaging to explore the latter question at the level of brain functioning. "We are looking at whether sleeping infants show evidence of processing emotional tones of voice, and whether processing of an angry tone of voice differs depending on the level of partner aggression in the home," Graham said.

The neuroimaging research will help us better understand the direct effects of aggression on children, said Fisher, who currently serves as science director for the National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs and as a senior fellow at the Center on the Developing Child,

both at Harvard University. "Early conflict may be interfering with the ability to be positive, nurturing parents," he said. "We need to be concerned about how this may affect the children."

The findings of the new paper are intriguing, said Kimberly Andrews Espy, vice president for research and innovation at the UO.

"They raise questions to whether these patterns of parenting are enduring and thus affect child development, or whether there is something unique about infancy that produces such longer term impacts," Espy said. "This work shows the power of translational clinical neuroscience at the UO, where cutting-edge science findings can be coupled with modern neuroimaging approaches to hopefully lead to new intervention approaches that help parents interact better and, in turn, reduce deleterious impacts on the developing child."

Provided by University of Oregon

Citation: Partner aggression in high-risk families affects parenting beginning at birth (2012, April 2) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-04-partner-aggression-high-risk-families-affects.html>

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